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ABSTRACT

This is a guide for teachers and administrators to familiarize them with the Laotian people, language and culture. The first section contains a brief geography and history of Laos, a discussion of the ethnic and lingustic groups of Laos, and information on the economic and religious life of these groups. Section two describes the Laotian refugee experience and considers some of the adjustments Laotians must make for their new life in the United States. This section also explains elements of the international, national and local support systems which assist Indochinese refugees. Section three gives a brief history of the educational system in Laos, and the implications for educational needs of Laotians now residing in the United States. Suggestions for working with Laotians in the schools and some potential problem areas are also covered. The last section presents an analysis of the Laotian language. Emphasis is placed on the problems Laotians have with English, and suggestions are made for overcoming these difficulties. A brief bibliography is included. (Author/APM)

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UNDERSTANDING LAOTIAN PEOPLE LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

Prepared for the Superintendent
of Public Instruction

by

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FOREWORD

The Bilingual Education Resource Series represents an effort to provide teachers and administrators with simple, concise information about some of the other languages and cultures commonly found among students in our classrooms.

It seems likely that Washington State will be receiving a sharp increase in the number of Laotian students enrolled in our schools. This booklet attempts to provide basic information on the language, culture, and broad values of these students. As most teachers of Laotians have discovered, relatively little is available in the bookstores by way of printed materials. It is our hope that this brief document will be useful to those who work with Laotian students.

We are indebted to Doctor Roger Harmon, who is a consultant with the Indochinese American Resettlement and Job Program, Seattle, for his perceptive ability to produce a paper that is neither too long nor too technical. Dr. Harmon has lived and worked for many years in Laos and Thailand as an anthropologist.

The Bilingual Education Resource Series is a continuing project and we expect to cover the main languages commonly found among the members of our pluralistic family.

Keith Crosbie
Coordinator, Bilingual Education
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

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UNDERSTANDING LAOTIAN PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

Laotians are new to Washington State and its schools. From April 1975 to June 1979 an estimated 650 Laotians have resettled here. We can expect the number of Laotians in the state to continue to increase over the next several years. At the time of this writing (June 1979) there are more than 130,000 Laotian refugees in camps in Thailand waiting for resettlement in other countries. Not all will come to the United States or to Washington State. However, in the next several years, probably 300 to 500 Laotians per year will resettle in the state. The majority will be of school age and will enter the public schools.

As of June 1979, 360 Laotians (approximately 80 households) reside in Seattle-King County. The only other major concentration of Laotians in the state is in Spokane, where there are about 30 families. Approximately 10 families live in the Tacoma-Gig Harbor-Bremerton area, and there are one or two families in Centralia, Wenatchee, Longview, Ellensberg, and in the Pasco-Richland area. Over time, the Laotian communities in these locales probably will increase slowly, and other areas will receive Laotian families.

To many Americans, the people from Laos have not been distinguished from refugees coming from Vietnam and Cambodia. This is changing as more Laotians have entered the state (especially since 1978), and as we are becoming more aware of differences between the various Indochinese peoples.

Many teachers and administrators already know that people from Laos--for whom we reserve the general term, "Laotians"--are actually divided into numerous ethnic and linguistic groups. In addition to the dominant political group, the Lao, there are various minority peoples residing in Laos, many of whom are represented in the Laotian population arriving in the U.S. Among the groups Americans are becoming familiar with are the "Hmong," "Yao," and "ethnic Chinese." Some of the cultural and linguistic similarities and differences of these various peoples will be discussed in the pages which follow. However, the diversity of peoples means that we cannot attempt a discussion of each of the groups. Where possible, we will emphasize the common characteristics and experience of Laotians, and list source materials for those who wish to explore the variety represented in the Laotian population.

The booklet is arranged in four sections. The first contains a brief geography and history of Laos. It also includes a discussion of the ethnic and linguistic groups of Laos, and contains information on the economic and religious life of these various groups. Section two describes the traumatic experiences Laotians have undergone as refugees, and considers some of the adjustments Laotians must make as they begin a new life in the U.S. The section explains elements of the international, national and local support system which assists Indochinese refugees. It is hoped that this section will make clear the fact that the schools are one of numerous institutions assisting refugees, and that schools can turn to various agencies for assistance in serving Laotians. Section three is a description of the educational system of Laos prior to 1975, that is, prior to the communist takeover in that country. This section also includes a discussion of the limited access to education in Laos, and the implications for educators of differences in educational approaches used in Laos and the United States. Suggestions for working with Laotians in the schools and some potential problem areas are discussed. The last section deals with language. Emphasis is placed on the problems Laotians have with English, and contains suggestions for overcoming these problems. A brief bibliography is included.

One additional personal note is in order. I have been working with Laotian refugees in Washington State for over a year. Prior to this time I lived in several countries in Asia, including one year in Laos where I taught English as a second language, and three years in Thailand where I taught and conducted anthropological research. During this time I have seen that the war in Indochina and the ongoing turmoil there has had a shattering impact on the lives of all Laotians. For many Laotians, the years of war have been followed by as many as four years in refugee camps in Thailand which have been physically and emotionally exhausting and frustrating. Laotian refugees arriving in the U.S. carry with them ties to and longing for family and loved ones still in the camps or in Laos. Yet, it is not their pain which Laotians make most obvious to us; rather, it is their gratefulness for a chance to start a new life in the U.S.

Laotians have much of beauty to share with interested and compassionate Americans. Because of the language barrier much of this beauty cannot be conveyed, at least initially, by words. However, it can be seen in their gentle traditional dances, in their haunting music, and in the world-renowned weaving, embroidery, applique and batik of their traditional costumes. It can be seen in the care shown each other within their families; in the desire to please

American guests at their gatherings; and, in the effort put into creating harmonious relations in social situations. Experiencing these and other characteristics of Laotians will enrich the lives of Americans who approach Laotian refugees with the desire to learn from them.

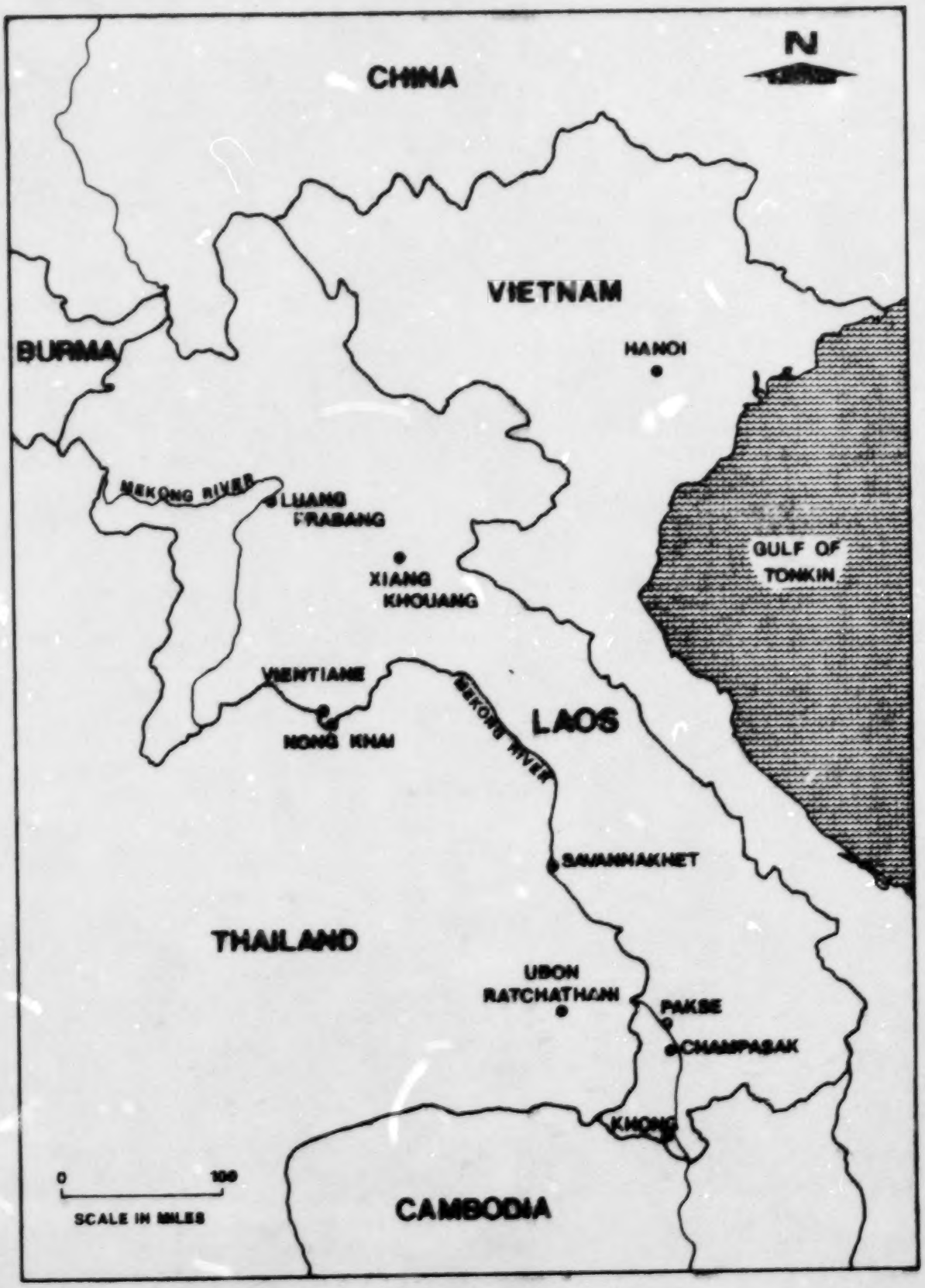
1. GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND THE PEOPLES OF LAOS

Laos is situated between Vietnam on the east and Thailand on the west, and also shares borders of several hundred miles with China, Burma and Cambodia. (See Map 1.) The country is comprised of river valleys, especially the Mekong River and its tributaries, and plateaus and mountains which rise to as high as 9,242 feet. Laos is landlocked, and its major lines of communication in recent years were through Thailand, though today they increasingly are with Vietnam.

The history of Laos which is known to the West is largely the history of one segment of the population, the Lao. The Lao constitute the dominant group in terms of numbers, political power and cultural influence. They trace their history back to a period of migration from southern China which began at least a thousand years ago. This migration was a gradual process culminating in 1353 A.C. in the formation of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang ("Land of a Million Elephants"). By the seventeenth century, Lan Xang had reached its political apex, and controlled the southernmost section of Yunnan in China, portions of what are now northeastern Burma and northeastern Thailand, and some mountain and plateau areas in Cambodia and Vietnam.

While at first Lan Xang prospered at the expense of other kingdoms in the region, it eventually experienced decline. Periodic invasions and conquests by the Burmese, Thai and the Vietnamese gradually reduced Lao territory. By 1893, the time at which the French established their colonial protectorate over Laos, the Kingdom had been fragmented into several princedoms, including Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the center, and Champasak in the south. The French halted the loss of Lao territory through a series of treaties conducted with the British (who ruled Burma at the time) and with the Thai.

Under the French (who were also the colonial rulers of Cambodia and Vietnam) the King of Luang Prabang retained his royal title and perogatives under French protection. However, in important respects Luang Prabang was administered indirectly by French officials. The rest of Laos was administered more directly through French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CHINA
VIETNAM
BURMA
HANOI
MEKONG RIVER
LUANG PRABANG
XIANG KHOUANG
GULF OF TONKIN
VIENTIANE
NONG KHAI
LAOS
MEKONG RIVER
SAVANNAKHET
THAILAND
UBON RATCHATHANI
PAKSE
CHAMPASAK
KHONG
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SCALE IN MILES
CAMBODIA

MAP 1 LAOS

commissioners. Between 1940 and 1953, control of Laos passed from the French to the Japanese, to the Lao, back to the French and back again to the Lao. In October 1953, Laos became a fully sovereign state.

The political history of Laos since independence is also highly complex. During these years Lao politics have been marked by a struggle between various Lao factions, usually identified as "conservative," "neutralist," and "communist." In the minds of many Americans, the war in Indochina has come to be thought of as the "Vietnam War." The fact is that the countries of Laos and Cambodia were equally caught up in this war. Increasingly in the 1960's, outside countries, including the United States, Russia, China and the communist government of Vietnam supported various Laotian factions and conducted military and economic activities in Laos. The U.S. government supplied large amounts of military and economic aid to Laos and a large number of advisors to the non-communist factions. Despite U.S. activity, including extremely heavy bombing of some portions of Laos, this effort was not successful in stemming the military successes of the Pathet Lao (the communist inspired forces of the Lao Patriotic Front) and the North Vietnamese. As Pathet Lao control extended to larger portions of the country, attempts at coalition rule which included the various Laotian factions were tried. The earliest attempt in June 1962 was weakened when the Pathet Lao withdrew their support within a year. As in Vietnam and Cambodia, the war escalated through the 1960's and early 1970's. In 1974 a final attempt at coalition rule was attempted, but in the following year the Pathet Lao faction took complete control of the government. An exodus of refugees across the Mekong River to Thailand began. The initial group of refugees were those who feared reprisals for their participation in the losing war effort and their connections with Americans. This exodus has continued to the present, and currently brings at least 3,000 Laotians monthly to the camps in Thailand.

Peoples of Laos

As in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, the ethnic diversity of Laos is great. Four major groupings of people, separated by differences in language, culture and ecological setting, are usually recognized. These four groups are the Lao, the mountaintop peoples (Hmong and Yao), the Lao Tai (or "tribal Tai") and the Lao Theung. In addition to these groups, the population also includes ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese, Thai and, until mid-1975 or shortly thereafter, Americans,

French and others. The diversity of the Laotian population as a whole is reflected in refugees resettled in Washington State. The Lao make up approximately fifty percent of Laotian refugee population, and the Hmong (Meo) about 35%. The remaining 15% are Yao, tribal Tai, Lao Theung, and Chinese and Vietnamese Laotians.

The Lao

The Lao live in the valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries. Most live in small villages, where they raise a variety of animals and crops, the most important of which is rice. Where possible, water from the rivers and streams is diverted to irrigate crops. Lao farming is done using human labor and hand tools; the water buffalo is used as a work animal. Most Lao farmers produce only enough to feed their families and make food offerings to the Buddhist monks, whose vows do not allow them to raise food. The monks, in return, perform religious services for the laity. A good rice crop may produce a surplus which can be used to finance preparations for a wedding, sponsor the ordination of a son into the monkhood, or purchase objects manufactured in the towns of Laos or abroad. Laotian villagers produce most of the objects they need. In the 1960's, development schemes encouraged villagers to produce surplus crops for the market and buy manufactured goods. This process was not far advanced in Laos, one of the least economically developed countries in Asia.

Most Lao are Buddhist. As such, they strive to follow the teachings of the Buddha, as conveyed by the Buddhist order of monks. The monk represents the highest ideal in Lao society, and every Buddhist male is encouraged to spend some time as a monk. A few men will remain in the monkhood for life, but most will return to lay life after a few months or years.

Lao ritual life is centered on Buddhist services conducted by the monks. Weekly services are held at the monastery (wat). Special days commemorating events in the life of the Buddha are arranged in a yearly cycle. Rituals in this cycle are held at times which correspond with major changes in the yearly agricultural cycle. Thus, religious, economic and other aspects of Lao life are closely intertwined and made meaningful in a yearly round of Buddhist ceremonies.

In addition to following Buddhist teachings and practices, Lao also make offerings to spirits (animism). They also hold beliefs related to the folk traditions of ancient India (folk Brahmanism).

Much of the religious life of the Lao and other Laotian peoples is not being practiced in the U.S. One ceremony of folk Brahmanic origin which is practiced here and which Americans working with Laotians may well have a chance to enjoy is the baci or suu khwan ("soul-tying ceremony"). The ceremony is generally held to welcome or honor a particular individual. It may also be performed to assist one who is ill or recuperating. It is traditionally believed that one's body has a life-sustaining "vital essence" whose loss means death. In addition, each of the body's thirty-two major parts has a "soul." These souls can wander outside the body, but their doing so may cause the individual sickness or misfortune. The soul-tying ceremony recalls to the body any of the individual's souls which might be wandering about. Special foods, chants and the tying of cotton strings to the wrist, serve to beckon the souls and bind them to the individual--thus promoting health and good fortune. Today, some Laotians may question the "multiple soul" concept, but do hold the ceremony for its social value.

The Hmong and Yao

In sharp contrast to the Lao are the people who inhabit the high plateaus and high mountain slopes, namely the Hmong (Meo) and the Yao (Man). Unlike the Lao, who cultivate permanent fields, the Hmong and Yao practice "slash-and-burn" agriculture. This form of cultivation involves cutting away portions of the forest, burning off remaining vegetation and then planting crops. These fields are not permanent. Instead, crops are planted for several years, and then new fields are prepared and the old fields left to lie fallow--to be returned to at a later date. In these upland fields the Hmong and Yao cultivate rice, corn, and a variety of vegetables. They raise horses and keep livestock for food and for use in their rituals. Some also cultivate opium poppies. While opium has been an important cash crop for those who raise it, it is the lowland distributors and not the upland peoples who have acquired substantial wealth from the opium trade.

The religion of most Hmong and Yao in Laos is animism. They believe that most things in nature have spirits which can bring them good or bad fortune. They endeavor to please these, and ancestral spirits, through sacrificial offerings. Some Hmong and other mountain dwellers have converted to Christianity. Increasing numbers of conversions are being made among upland peoples who are now in refugee camps in Thailand. The majority of Hmong who have come to Washington State are Christian.

Lao Tai and Lao Theung

Two other major populations in Laos are the Lao Tai ("tribal Tai") and the Lao Theung. They make up approximately one-sixth and one-fourth of the Laotian population, respectively. The peoples within these two broad groupings share some characteristics with the Lao, and others with the mountaintop dwellers.

The various Lao Tai groups are referred to by numerous terms, the most common being the Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Khao (White Tai), Tai Deng (Red Tai), Tai Neua, Tai Phong, Phou Tai and Lue. These names are general designations and distinguish these peoples according to the color of their traditional costumes, their location, or some other real or imagined identifying characteristic. The various Tai dialects are of the same general linguistic structure as Lao, and for the most part are mutually intelligible. Some of the dialects have writing systems, which are generally based on the same Indic sources as the Lao and Thai (Siamese) alphabets.

The various Lao Tai peoples live chiefly in the higher mountain valleys of northern Laos. Their subsistence economy is based primarily on irrigated rice, though other crops are also raised in the valley fields, and the mountain slopes are often used for non-irrigated fields of rice and wheat.

The religious beliefs and practices of the various groups differ somewhat. All include animistic elements, and some groups, such as the Lue, are Buddhist.

The Lao Theung is a general term applied to a large number of upland peoples, all of whom are thought to speak languages of the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. Anthropologists suspect that these peoples, of which the best known are the Khmu, T'in, Lamet and Loven, are descendants of the original people of Laos. The Lao Theung live on mountain slopes and largely use slash-and-burn techniques to cultivate rice, maize, tobacco, cotton and other crops. They also hunt and gather forest products--as do other upland peoples of Laos. The Lao Theung groups are largely animistic, though some who live near centers of Lao influence have adopted Buddhism.

Other Ethnic Groups

Another important minority in Laos are people who have come from the neighboring countries of China, Vietnam and Thailand. While small in number, they performed important functions in Lao urban centers. The overseas Chinese in Laos have been involved in trading and small-scale manufacturing. Some Thai have done the same, while others, especially rural people from neighboring northeast Thailand, have worked as temporary laborers. The Vietnamese were originally brought by the French colonial rulers to serve as clerks in government offices; their descendants entered trading and took craft and service occupations. (Some of the Chinese and Vietnamese of Laos have become refugees.) There has been some intermarriage between these people and the Lao. Of particular importance in this regard is the intermarriage between ethnic Chinese (generally men) and ethnic Lao (especially women). Individuals from these marriages often identify as Lao in many contexts, but may speak one or more Chinese dialects.

Social Change

The political elite of Laos have traditionally been Lao--from the King and his court through the various levels of the government bureaucracy. They have been concentrated in the urban centers of Luang Prabang (the Royal Capital where the King resided), Vientiane (the Administrative Capital) and, to a lesser degree, in Savannakhet (south-central Laos) and Pakse and Champasak (southern Laos). Each of these towns is located on the Mekong River. (See Map 1.) The degree to which Lao political authority has extended into the thousands of villages in Laos varies a great deal. Near the urban centers there has been much contact between various groups, and some of the minority peoples have taken on Lao ways and Lao identity. The more remote areas have enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from Lao authority; in these areas many decisions have been made at the village or household level, following traditional patterns of leadership.

The last several decades of turmoil in Laos has radically altered the fabric of Laotian society. The war has turned farmers into soldiers, and has dislocated people from ways of life they have practiced for centuries. This is true for all Laotians, but it is especially visible among some of the upland minorities whose contact with modern technology and with Westerners was almost non-existent until recent years.

The above portrait of Laotian peoples and their forms of life stresses traditional patterns. These patterns continue, to a degree, but the refugees whom you meet will have had lives in Laos which were greatly disrupted. A few individuals--especially some of the men who were soldiers--will have had extensive experience with Americans, and may speak English fairly well. Most Laotians will have had much less contact with Americans: they will have had their Laotian ways disrupted, but will not be familiar with Western ways. What all Laotians coming to this country have in common is months or years in a refugee camp waiting to be resettled in countries and cultures with which they are not familiar. It will help us to explore the refugee camp experience in some detail.

2. THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

When the communist government took control of Laos in 1975, thousands of Laotian government and military personnel fled across the Mekong River to Thailand. They feared reprisals would be directed against them. Their fears take on a special meaning when we understand that many worked directly with and were paid by U.S. military and intelligence agencies. Furthermore, many were promised that if the war effort failed they would be given assistance by the Americans they had served. The U.S. government anticipated that those individuals who felt compelled to leave Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia would do so soon after the fall of their countries. However, for four years, people have continued to pour out of Indochina.

People leaving Laos must clandestinely escape across the wide Mekong River by boat, by makeshift raft or by swimming. Both the journey to the river and the trip across it are dangerous. People attempting to escape are shot. Many Laotians say that as many die enroute as reach Thailand. In addition, there is some evidence that there is now a communist attempt to eliminate certain upland minority peoples in Laos because of their identification with Americans in the war.

For those who cross the river there are still hazards: they may be stripped of their belongings by thieves, shot, or forced back across the river. Because the refugees are illegal aliens (and are usually impoverished) the only choice for most is to turn themselves over to Thai authorities to be processed in detention centers and sent to the refugee camps.

During 1978 and 1979 Laotians have been arriving at the camps at a rate of over 4,000 per month. While the Thais are not anxious to have large numbers of refugees within their borders, they have agreed to administer the refugee camps, on the condition that other countries will accept these people for resettlement. Food and other basic needs in the camps are supplied by the United Nations, through its High Commissioner for Refugees. Upon arrival in the camp, the refugee is registered by a U.N. official and begins the long wait.

For some, the wait has lasted over four years. The reasons for this are complex. Each of the countries accepting refugees has its own criteria and policies for refugee acceptance. Some refugees are considered more desirable for resettlement than others.

The U.S. has devised a four-level priority system in which first priority is given to those refugees who are close relatives of persons who entered the U.S. prior to June 14, 1978, and to unaccompanied children and young adults, seventeen years of age and under, whose parents or guardians are deceased or were otherwise unable to leave their country of nationality. Second and third priorities are for individuals who were U.S. government employees, or individuals who, because of their close association with the U.S., were persecuted by or were likely to be punished by the communist regime. A final category includes those who do not fit into the above categories, but who should be granted resettlement status on humanitarian grounds. In order to encourage other countries to accept refugees, the U.S. has allowed other countries to have "first pick" of refugees to be resettled. Unless there are compelling reasons (such as the existence of close relatives in the U.S.) a refugee is ineligible for resettlement in the U.S. if an offer from another country has been rejected. (In effect, the refugee who refuses another country's resettlement invitation, goes to the bottom of the U.S. list for consideration.) Many Laotian refugees do not have the skills and the language capabilities which make them attractive to accepting nations. Others have refused offers from one nation, in hopes that they can join family members already in another country. (There are cases of single families scattered throughout France, the U.S. and Australia.)

The U.S. priority system requires substantial interrogation and documentation procedures in order to establish family relations and proof of past employment background. This is extremely time consuming. But the major reason resettlement takes so long is political: there is a lack of political support in the United States which would make the admission and support of refugees a greater priority. Laotians are

flowing into the camps much more quickly than they are being resettled in other countries. In addition, securing adequate numbers of sponsors in the U.S. has been an on-going struggle. Finally, it should be mentioned that the plight of the Laotian refugee is much less well known than that of the Vietnamese and Cambodians.

Life in the Camps

Camp life breeds physical and mental health problems for the refugees. The camps are extremely overcrowded and sanitation is a constant problem. There is distrust between the refugees and the Thai officials who administer the camps--a reflection of the tensions on the Thai-Lao border where the camps are located, and of the difficult relations between the countries of Thailand and Laos. Violence in the camps is not uncommon. The amount of food supplied the refugees is barely adequate--due partially to the pilfering of food before it reaches the people for whom it is intended. Medical attention is provided by a number of dedicated individuals--but only the most basic services can be made available for the large population, which numbers over 35,000 in some of the larger camps.

The lack of meaningful activity in the camps is a major problem. Some of the camps have small garden plots which refugees plant and tend; some women make small amounts of money by selling embroidered handicrafts; some adults study English or French, and there are sometimes makeshift schools for children. In some of the camps individuals are allowed to perform day labor in nearby towns or villages, but this is not constant and exploitation is reported to be common. Aside from these endeavors there is little to break the fear and despair of camp life. The death of loved ones who have failed in their escape attempt, and concern for the difficult lives of family members left in Laos are on the minds of the refugees. And, as the camp population grows, refugees fear that the Thais will become increasingly frustrated and force them back into Laos, where they face almost certain death.

Under these circumstances, the interview to determine resettlement eligibility becomes critical to the refugee. For those who want to go to the United States, preliminary screening and interviewing is done by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). IRC is contracted to perform this task by the American Council of Voluntary Agencies (ACVA). IRC personnel prepare the materials which must accompany the application for resettlement presented to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Immigration officials conduct the formal

interview which determines the refugee's eligibility for the U.S. refugee program. Because of the limited quotas for Laotians, there is little attempt on the part of immigration officials to be lenient in determining eligibility.

As additional refugees are approved for resettlement in the U.S., their cases are assigned to New York based voluntary agencies, referred to as "Volags." Each agency decides the number of cases it can resettle nationally in a given period of time. From the Volag headquarters in New York, the individual cases are matched with local sponsors who have pledged support. The agencies which are placing the largest number of refugees have offices in major U.S. cities to assist in sponsorship development and resettlement.

The local Volag offices offer differing services. For example, local IRC offices act as (and legally are) refugee sponsors. They utilize caseworkers who resettle refugees. Other offices, such as the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) office and the Lutheran Immigration and Relief Service (LIRS) affiliate in Seattle, and the Catholic Charities office in Spokane, assist sponsors, but are not sponsors, per se: They anticipate that the congregational and individual sponsors which they serve will take care of most refugee needs, such as locating housing, enrolling students in schools and taking people to medical appointments. All of these offices can provide information and referral. When necessary, each can either provide bilingual interpreters from their staff, or arrange for assistance from a bilingual speaker from the ethnic community.

When refugees receive a sponsorship offer in the U.S., they leave the refugee camp for a staging center near Bangkok. Here, final medical screening and administrative details are taken care of, and the refugees are flown to the United States. They clear U.S. immigration on the West Coast, and are put on another plane for their final destination. They enter the U.S. with the special immigration status of "parole." After two years they can apply for status as permanent residents, and after a total of five years in the U.S. can apply for U.S. citizenship.

In addition to the Volags, there are a variety of other government and private agencies which assist refugees. These agencies vary from state to state, reflecting the different resettlement approaches utilized in the various states. In Washington State, the state-level agency responsible for coordinating various services to refugees is the Indochinese Refugee Program of the Department

of Social and Health Services, Olympia. The costs of almost all state programs for refugees are reimbursed the state by the federal government, through funds appropriated by Congress. These funds are channeled to the state through the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; the HEW Region 10 office in Seattle facilitates this process. Individual elementary and secondary schools may be eligible for special federal and state funds to carry out their programs for refugees. For specific information the school can contact its district office, or the Bilingual Education Office of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia.

Some of the services available to refugees are employment counseling and job placement, English a second language instruction, vocational training, medical assistance and mental health counseling. Public assistance, sometimes called "welfare," is also available. It is perhaps incorrect to use the term "welfare" in this case, since special assistance funds have been appropriated by Congress to assist refugees until they can find work.

Even with these types of support, the refugee faces many difficulties, the most obvious of which are learning English and adjusting to new ways of living. Some of the subtle difficulties are the cultural adjustments which must be made. Most Laotians were rural farmers, but are resettling in urban areas in the U.S. Most have been accustomed to very personal ways of interacting with others, but here often are faced with well-intentioned, but impersonal employees of large, bureaucratic institutions. Many of the religious, political and social leaders which guided them in their lives in Laos are not with them now.

There are no Laotian Buddhist monks in the U.S. Without the monks, religious life for Lao Buddhists is limited. To my knowledge, none of the Buddhist religious holidays are being publicly commemorated in Washington State. The single Lao holiday celebrated in the last several years has been Lao New Year, which occurs in mid-April. This holiday, participated in by Laotians of all the ethnic groups in the area, generally includes a feast, dancing and traditional well-wishing for a prosperous year. The Hmong in King County also held a celebration to commemorate their New Year, which falls in December or January, as reckoned by the lunar calendar.

Important events in the lives of Laotians in the U.S., such as marriages or the arrival of relatives from the Thai camps, are celebrated by feasting. These events sometimes include well-wishing and advice from elders. The celebration may include a "soul-tying" ceremony (baci).

It is not easy for Laotians to develop patterns of authority and leadership which help them meet their individual and community needs. In Laos, a household often contained extended families. In these households authority rested with older relatives, especially men. (Women had considerable influence in financial and other affairs in the home.) This has been altered in many refugee families because relatively few older people have come to the U.S. In Laos, decisions affecting groups larger than the household were often made at the village level. In the U.S., Laotian people are not, of course, organized into villages; when they do live in the same locale, they are often scattered throughout urban areas, making contact somewhat difficult. Some Laotians have been exposed to other forms of decision making through military service, through government jobs, or through life in Laotian towns and large Thai refugee camps. Nonetheless, it will take time to learn which Laotian patterns of leadership can be adapted for use in the U.S., and which patterns will need to be altered or abandoned. Interestingly, it may be easier for groups such as the Hmong, who have a strong clan organization to develop leadership patterns which are effective in the U.S. To date, Hmong in the U.S. have tended to migrate to areas where clan members are located, and perhaps have been able to offer each other a greater degree of support than has been true of other groups. In Washington State all groups are participating in the newly-formed Lao Lang Xang Association of Washington, whose objective is to provide leadership and assistance for Laotians.

3. LAOTIAN EDUCATION AND LAOTIANS IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Education in Laos

Secular public schools are relatively new institutions in Laos. In fact, the first secular schools in the country were established by France in 1902 and 1905. These were schools of adult education, which were set up, in part, to fill the need for Laotian secretary-interpreters and minor officials needed to help administer the French

protectorate. This system was later expanded to provide elementary training to children. The first elementary teachers in this system were French, and then, Vietnamese. From 1909-1911, four teacher training colleges were opened to train Laotian Buddhist monks to be teachers in the secular system.

For centuries, monks had been teaching the boys (but not girls) of Buddhist families. The boys often lived at the monastery while they studied and served the monks. The education given the boys was "moral" in the broadest sense of the term: In addition to studying reading, writing and basic mathematics, the boys were expected to learn basic Buddhist morality, through assisting the monks and through observing their exemplary way of life. The life of the monk, with its restrictions against the pleasures of the world, represented the highest ideal in Lao Buddhist cultures. As such, Buddhist parents hoped that their sons would become novices or monks for a part of their life. (In Laotian forms of Buddhism, a man can become a monk for a period--often three months to several years--and then return to the life of the lay person. Some individuals will remain monks for their whole life.)

If one did become a novice or a monk his minimum training would include exposure to the basic elements of the Pali language (and perhaps the Lao language), some arithmetic, an oral grounding in Buddhist doctrine, and practical training gained through working around the monastery. The novice or monk who had ability, inclination, and who resided at a monastery which valued learning, would be exposed to a much larger curriculum: His studies would be centered on learning Buddhist ethics from the Pali religious texts, but might also include Buddhist art and other utilitarian subjects such as astrology and herbal medicine. While virtually none of the Laotian primary and secondary students in American schools will have studied this religion-based curriculum, their fathers or other male relatives have probably entered the priesthood for a time, and will have studied some of these topics.

While many Buddhist boys became literate through monastery education, the same was not the case for girls -- partially because literacy was not considered necessary for females, and because the vows of the monk largely restricted his contact with females to ritual settings. It is only within the last several decades that educational benefits have been extended to women, through their increasing participation in the government sponsored primary schools whose teachers are lay civil servants, not monks.

Even when secular education became available to females, fewer of them attended school than did boys -- and for a shorter number of years. Regardless of whether girls went to school or not, much of their knowledge was gained in the home, where they took care of siblings, and assumed a number of housekeeping and agricultural chores. Many learned the process of making and adorning clothing at an early age. Actually, young boys also learned at an early age a good deal of what they needed to know in their society, through assisting with livestock and doing agricultural tasks.

The monastery schools benefitted the Lao and other Buddhists (such as some tribal Tai peoples), but virtually no formal education existed for most of the upland minorities until after World War II. (The only exception are the very small number who studied in Laotian towns and in missionary outposts prior to this time.) As late as 1975, only a small percentage of upland minority people were exposed to formal schooling. The skills needed to live in their rural, agricultural society were learned from parents, relatives, and respected elders -- often through direct participation in the task to be learned.

From the beginning of this century formal schooling has increasingly been taken out of the hands of the monks and given to lay teachers. However, the role of the monk in educating the young has declined gradually. From 1909-1911, four teacher training colleges were opened (in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse) to retrain Laotian monks as teachers in the secular system. Instead of abolishing the traditional monastery schools--an impossibility due to the shortage of teachers--both monastery and secular primary schools continued to be utilized. For several decades the majority of students attended the monastery schools even though various French decrees attempted to expand the number of primary schools. For example, in 1917 the French set up an education system for all of Indochina, and declared that each commune was to have on official primary school. (In Laos, the country is divided into increasingly smaller units of provinces, districts, communes, and villages.) In addition, secular schools for the villages were authorized. The village was to use local labor and materials to build the school and the teacher's house; the government was to provide the teacher and school materials. The number of these self-help schools increased, especially during the 1960's when financial assistance for building materials was being provided through economic development funds.

The first secondary schools in Laos were the Pavie College at Vientiane (1925) and provincial schools in Pakse (1945), Luang Prabang (1946) and Savannakhet (1947). In addition, an interest in the arts led to the establishment of special schools for silversmithing (at Khong), iron and woodworking (Vientiane) and weaving and lamé (Pakse). Selected students were sent to specialized schools in Saigon, Hanoi and Pnompenh. A very few children, especially those from elite families, went to France or Thailand. A handful of schools for tribal minorities were reported in the 1940's, and Hmong children in the vicinity of Xieng Khouang were encouraged to attend school in the provincial capitol. During this period, religious schools were also upgraded.

The education system in Laos followed the French pattern. Primary school was ordered into two cycles of three years each -- the elementary and the complementary. As of 1975, instruction in the elementary cycle was in Lao, and in the complementary cycle in French. (Later levels were all in French, except in a very few colleges and in the universities, where recent American impact led to offering classes in Lao.) Secondary school consists of two levels consisting of 3 years of collège and 1 year at the lycée. In principle, education in Laos is compulsory for children ages 6-14, which corresponds to the two cycles of primary education. In practice, enforcement of the law has been lax. In 1972 there were 2,413 primary schools in Laos, with 7,340 teachers (30% female) and 247,067 students (41% female). This represents about 8% of the Laotian population of some 3 million -- a percentage which is significantly lower than the percentage of children in that age range.

The number of students in the collège and lycée level gradually increased, but by the 1970's there were still only several thousand students at this level. By this time there were collèges in numerous provincial centers, but the only lycée was in Vientiane, the Lycée Pavie.

In the 1960's and 1970's U.S., French, Colombo Plan and UNESCO aid resulted in rapid expansion of the education system and in increased technical assistance. A university was opened in Vientiane which, in 1973, had 875 university students enrolled in faculties of Education, Law and Medical Science. Technical education was also expanded during this period through construction of several technical schools and technical craft schools, the latter providing pre-vocational training. Teacher training was also expanded.

By 1975, the formal system of education in Laos extended from elementary through university levels. However, it is important to understand that access to education was limited at every level. A study of literacy in Laos was conducted in 1968, with literacy defined as a 4th grade reading level. The study found that of the males aged 15-45, fifty to sixty percent were literate; of the females aged 14-35, twenty-five percent were literate. Among 14-24 year olds, 75% of males and 29% of the females were literate. Literary rates were slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas for both men and women, as reflected in these percentages: urban males 41% literacy; urban females 13%; and rural males 31%, rural females 10% literacy. This low level of literacy, coupled with the fact that English as a second language was not a required (or even optional) subject in most Lao schools, will have great significance for American educators.

The low educational level of recent Laotian refugees to the U.S. is reflected in a recent survey taken in King County, Wash. In a sample of 38 adults, 9 had no formal schooling, 10 had 1-3 years of schooling, and 9 had 3-6 years. Of the remaining 8 individuals, 2 had 12 years of schooling, the maximum number of years represented in the sample. It is clear that in many of the refugee families, the children have had more formal education than the parents. In a culture in which authority is based on age as much as achievement, this places a very significant strain on the social fabric of the family.

Laotians in American Schools

The American school will be the first one that some Laotians attend. Even those who have attended other schools will need a thorough introduction to their new school--an introduction to its facilities, it operating procedures, the teaching methods employed, and the subjects to be learned.

Some Laotian children will have been in large buildings only when accompanied by older family members; thus, the size and layout of the school may be confusing. To help overcome this, some schools have found it useful to have a parent bring the child to school the first day and spend the day with the child. Even if the parent does not speak English, his or her presence in the classroom will be useful in helping the child adjust to the new

surroundings. When a family has several school age children, the children can be introduced to the school over several days in "stairstep" fashion: Once the oldest child has been introduced to the school, he or she can spend a day helping orient the next younger, and so on. Laotian students already in the school can also be helpful. In this instance, it is necessary to make sure that the students involved share a common language: Many young children from upland groups do not speak or understand Lao.

There are various places the school can turn for help in working with Laotian students. However, if possible, it is advisable for the school to hire a Laotian bilingual tutor or instructional assistant. School districts serving Indochinese refugee children are eligible for funds to offset the cost (at least partially) of bilingual tutors or instructional assistants. Laotian bilingual tutors are helpful in schools in a number of ways. In addition to assisting with instruction (both in the classroom and working individually with students), tutors provide liaison between the school, students and parents. They translate notices and reports sent home to parents, help students put on cultural events, provide counsel--and even assist students in finding summer jobs. With proper training, the Laotian tutor can also help explain to students and parents the differences between American and Laotian approaches to education.

The bilingual tutor is indeed helpful; nonetheless, for a variety of reasons they are not used by the majority of school districts which have Laotian students. In some cases bilingual tutors are not available; in others there are too few Laotian students, and therefore, too few work hours per week, to interest a potential tutor. Some districts choose to use Americans trained in "English as a Second Language" instruction (ESL) to perform many of the tasks which the bilingual tutor carries out. Often where Laotian bilingual tutors are not used, schools have developed strong relationships with Laotian community leaders who provide the communication links needed. The refugee sponsor is also a valuable resource. The sponsor may be a church congregation, an American family, an international refugee relief organization (such as the International Rescue Committee) or Laotian relatives already established in this country. In each of these sponsorship arrangements, an individual is designated to assist the family. The sponsor can be called upon to help orient the family to the school. In fact, it is probably the refugee sponsor who will first contact the school about enrolling the refugee. The sponsor can help prepare school forms before the first day of school. The school

should take the opportunity to gain as much information about the family as the sponsor can provide. The sponsor will have biographical information about the family and perhaps some data about the background and interests of its adult members. Sponsors may also provide other information, including the current living arrangements of the family; whether the parents are working, studying or both; any current health problems or other difficulties the family is now experiencing, and some idea of the languages spoken by the family and their levels of proficiency in English. In some larger school districts where student intake is performed at a central district office, the individual school may receive only a minimum amount of information; in this case the school will want to contact the sponsor directly, to find out the above information. It is important that all teachers in the school be aware of pertinent information about the refugee families.

When the school requires a bilingual interpreter, the sponsor can put school authorities in touch with a Volag. The Volag can either provide this service by telephone, or provide referral to another agency. Volags also know how to contact Laotian community leaders and/or state authorities working with Indochinese refugees. Another source of information and interpreting assistance is the toll free "hotline" of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program. This number is 1-800-424-0212. Service is available from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Monday through Friday, except holidays.

Just as the physical environment may confuse the student, so may the school regulations and procedures. These can be explained to students most easily if a bilingual assistant is available. However, with or without the bilingual assistant, there is an ongoing need for counseling. High school students will know very little about the special programs and opportunities available to them. They may have questions about initial placement and about graduation requirements. Possible choices for higher education and careers will not be clear to them. Without someone in the school to discuss these issues--and to be an advocate and friend--school will be confusing and frustrating.

American teaching methods and classroom procedures are decidedly different from those used in Laos, and will be unfamiliar to Laotian students. In the Laotian school, the teacher often teaches by writing the lesson on the blackboard. Students copy the lesson in their notebooks, and are required to master the material through

incessant repetition. Most learning in Lao classrooms is by rote; in subjects where interpretation of material is called for, it is the teacher's interpretation which is important. (In Laotian schools, textbooks are not readily available to students, and reference books and other reading materials are rare.) In this type of learning students follow explicit directions given by the teacher. Innovation by students, including asking questions, is not encouraged. Inattention is often punished by striking the student with a ruler. In the monastery schools monks were expected to use whatever measures of punishment were necessary to discipline the students under their charge. This approach was carried over to the Laotian secular schools.

The emphasis in Laos is on copying from the blackboard, memorizing by rote, and accepting the teacher as total authority. This framework puts the Laotian student at a special disadvantage in American schools. American students are directed to work more independently, to discover and understand facts and concepts, and are encouraged to form opinions of their own. This process requires creative thinking and good reading skills. The Laotian student will not only have difficulty reading English, but is also likely to have poor comprehension. In addition, he or she will find it difficult to understand spoken and written questions. Even when the questions are understood and the student knows the answer, it is unlikely that he or she will offer the answer out of fear of failure.

In working with Laotian students an emphasis on reading and verbal skills is needed. It is also important to impress upon students the need to read widely--and to provide stimulating and appropriate material for them. While the American student may find this attitude present in the home, this will not be true for the Laotian student. There is no tradition in the Laotian home of reading as a pasttime. It is also possible that both student and parent will be learning English reading and speaking skills at the same time.

Interaction With Parents

In Laos, parents had little involvement with the formal education of their children. This fact, plus lack of familiarity with American schools, makes Laotian parents reluctant to approach school personnel regarding their children's education. They feel

they should leave the education of their children to the schools, and not bother teachers unless absolutely necessary. This attitude may make it difficult for the teacher to find out useful information which would help in providing the best possible instruction. When the teacher requires specific information the sponsor may need to provide liaison between the school and the family.

Not only do Laotian parents trust the majority of the responsibility for their children's education to the schools, they turn over more responsibilities to their children at earlier ages than do most Americans. In Laos by the time a young man is of secondary school age, he might well have been married and have fought in the war. He will also have experienced the adult pleasures of smoking and drinking at an earlier age than his American counterpart. (This is one reason for not placing the Laotian student in grade levels too far below his age.)

Even with these differences, the difficulties teachers have with Laotian students will be caused more from the students' lack of assertiveness, rather than their being too assertive. Nonetheless, teachers and bilingual aides report that as the boys learn more English, they may take on some aggressive behavior patterns. They often "get caught," as one bilingual assistant explained:

> Laotian kids want to be the same as the American kids. But Lao kids don't know how to disguise what they do, and are the ones who get caught. They feel bad. They wonder why the teacher gets angry at them and not the others.

When it does seem necessary to reprimand these students, it is advisable to avoid criticizing them in front of class. In the beginning, at least, private discussions will help maintain smooth and harmonious relations.

While the various ethnic groups have been described above, the schools will find that refugees from Laos are very tolerant and that they have chosen to downplay ethnic differences. This is a pragmatic approach. Laotians are a small minority within the small Indochinese minority in the U.S. They feel they have little to gain from publicly airing the ethnic differences among themselves. The approach the school might wish to use is to identify all Laotian refugees as "Laotian," until students and parents indicate a desire to be identified by a more specific label, such as "Hmong," "Yao," "Lao," etc.

The need of the parents to deal with their own pressing problems, combined with the cultural pattern of children (especially males) being considered adult at an earlier age, results in what may seem like neglect to Americans. Some teachers have expressed concern over the amount of television watched by Laotian students. To a degree this is a reflection of the isolation that many Laotians experience in this culture. This is ironic, because Laotians are both very social and warmly hospitable in their own country.

Visiting Laotian Homes

It is likely that as teachers become more involved with their Laotian students, they may be invited to their homes. Americans will find the same relaxed atmosphere in Laotian homes as they find in most American homes. They will invariably be offered something to drink, and possibly something to eat. It will be apparent from the attentiveness shown by the host that the visit is considered an honor. Even though Laotians are not comfortable looking at people directly, and do not maintain eye contact, this is neither an indication of unfriendliness nor fear. While it is possible that conversations may lag, this is something that will not disturb most Laotians and should not be of concern to the Americans. The Laotians' inquisitive nature is often expressed in questions which may seem quite personal to Americans. (For example, they might well ask how much a personal object costs.) Thus, Americans need not worry about offending by asking inappropriate questions. The obvious mutual subject is the student; parents and teachers alike want the school experience to be fulfilling.

There are very few Lao customs which will restrict Americans in relating to the students and their families. The ones Americans should be aware of concern the Laotian concepts of sexual modesty and appropriate physical propriety. While differences exist between the various groups, it is possible to generalize about attitudes towards the body which Laotians hold. The head is considered the most revered part of the body. Adults seldom touch each other on the head, although this does not apply to children. Conversely, the feet are considered the most offensive part of the body; they are not placed in ways which touch or obtrusively point at other people. Laotians, especially men, are becoming accustomed to using the Western style handshake, and Americans can feel comfortable using this form of greeting. Aside from shaking hands, it is inappropriate

for men and woman to have body contact with those other than their spouses. At the same time, children receive much affectionate contact.

One other difference which the American may notice, is a different concept of time. One should be aware of this, and try not to be disturbed when someone arrives later than expected or an event begins later than announced.

The above differences have been mentioned to help Americans appreciate some aspects of Laotian culture. It is the similarities, however, which must be emphasized. Laotians want to be accepted by Americans, and be part of American society. The schools have a major role to play in helping to meet these goals.

4. LAOTIAN LANGUAGES AND ESL INSTRUCTION

In this section the Lao language, the national language of Laos, will be described, and comparisons will be made between the Lao and Hmong languages. Approximately 50% of the Laotian refugees coming to this state are Lao; about 30% are Hmong. Most of the remainder of the Laotian refugee population speak languages related to Lao or related to Hmong.

The material included in this section is largely paraphrased and greatly abbreviated from portions of several Indochinese Refugee Education Guides, prepared by the National Indochinese Clearinghouse of the Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia. To date the Center has prepared 48 Guides and a number of other publications for use by those working with Indochinese refugee education. These materials, most of which are concerned with ESL methods, are an excellent source of information, and can be ordered free of charge by calling the Center's toll-free hotline, 1-800-336-3040. The specific Guides utilized in preparing this section are Guide No. 14, "The Hmong Language: Sounds and Alphabets"; No. 15, "The Hmong Language: Sentences, Phrases and Words"; and, especially, a forthcoming Guide, No. 19, "Teaching English to Speakers of Lao." Two other Guides in the series which concern Laotians are No. 16, "Glimpses of Hmong Culture and Recent History in Laos," and No. 17, "An Annotated Bibliography of Material on the Hmongs of Laos."

Lao and Hmong Languages

The Lao language is closely related to the Thai language--so closely that it is sometimes considered a dialect of Thai, rather than a separate language. Thai, Lao and the "tribal Tai" languages all belong to the Tai-Kadai language family. There are several dialects of Lao spoken in Laos and northeast Thailand. (The majority of the people in northeast Thailand are ethnic Lao, though their national identity is with Thailand.) A Lao dialect is identified by a label relating to the geographical area where the dialect is spoken, such as the Luang Prabang dialect, the Vientiane dialect, etc.

Lao language has borrowed words and concepts from various other languages (and peoples) including Thai, Cambodian, French and English. A great number of religious words have been added from the Sanskrit and Pali languages, which are the languages of Theravada Buddhism. As words have been borrowed from other languages, they have been modified to fit the sound and structure of Lao words. For example, in Lao, the word 'America'--phonetically [a^{1}me:^{1}li^{2}ka^{1}] has a long vowel in the second syllable (the long vowel indicated by the colon) and with an [l] as a substitute for an English [r].

The numbers in the above transcription signify the tones of the several syllables. Lao is a tonal language; each syllable of a word has one of six tones, indicated in transcriptions here with the numbers 1-6. Number 1 is normal level; 2, mid level; 3, high level; 4, falling; 5, gliding; 6, low level. One of the major differences between various Lao dialects is that some words are spoken using different tones. The Luang Prabang dialect is used in the examples given below.

Native Lao words consist of one syllable, with the syllable made up of a vowel or diphthong (vowel combination), usually preceded by a consonant, and sometimes ending with a consonant. Words with several syllables are borrowed from other languages, or are combinations of several single syllable Lao words. For example, the Lao word for 'worker' [k'on^{1} het^{2} ka:n^{1}] is comprised of [k'on^{1}] 'person' [het^{2}] 'do' and [ka:n^{1}] 'work.'

There are many compound words in Lao, but there are no prefixes or suffixes. Thus, one finds no elements in Lao like the English trans--(as in transport, translation or transition) which are

attached to other elements to change their meaning. Additional words (instead of suffixes and prefixes) are used in Lao to indicate plurals, possessives and case markers.

Lao personal pronouns do not change form. (Thus, 'he' and 'him' are represented by the same word in Lao). Second, there is no gender (sex distinction) in Lao pronouns ('he' and 'she' are represented by the same word). However, different pronouns are used to indicate the relative social status of people involved in the conversation. For example, a person talking to a superior will refer to himself with one term, but, in talking to someone of lesser status (such as a child) will refer to himself with another term. Both of these terms translate into English as 'I.'

Lao has twenty consonants. (These are sounds, not letters of the alphabet.) Eleven consonants are pronounced pretty much like parallel consonants in English: [b], [d], [f], [s], [h], [m], [n], [n͡g] (as in English sing), [l], [y], and [w] (which is sometimes pronounced [v]). Lao has two different kinds of [p]'s, [t]'s and [k]'s, called aspirated and unaspirated. The aspirated varieties are pronounced with a puff of air. They are represented with a ' after the symbol, (e.g., [p']). Examples of aspirated consonants are the first sounds in the English words pill, tie and key. In conventional spellings in Roman alphabet, these sounds are generally represented as ph, th and kh. In contrast, unaspirated varieties are represented without the ' following the letters, (thus [p], [t] and [k]), and are pronounced without a puff of air. English has unaspirated consonants, but only in consonant clusters, like spill, still and skill. We do not usually hear the differences between unaspirated and aspirated consonants in English, and until we become accustomed to Lao, unaspirated [p], [t], and [k] my sound like [b], [d], and [g], respectively.

The three remaining consonants in Lao are [?], [n͡y] and [t͡y]. [?] is a glottal stop, formed by closing the vocal chords briefly--(as the break between the syllables in the English word uh-uh, meaning 'NO'). [n͡y]--two letters, but one sound, as indicated by the ͡ --is the sound in the English canyon. The sound [t͡y]--also one sound--is close to the English ch as in church.

All the twenty Lao consonants can occur at the beginnings of words, and [w] can also occur as the second consonant at the beginnings of words, as in [kwa:ng^{1}] 'deer.' At the ends of words, only some consonants occur, specifically [p], [t], [k], [?], [m], [n], [n͡g], [w] and [y].

Lao has many vowels, twenty-two altogether, including nine short vowels, a series of their long counterparts (the same sounds produced to last longer), and four diphthongs. The vowels are as follows:

[i], like English ee as in beet, sometimes like English i as in bit.
[e], like English ay as in play,
[ɛ], like English e as in bet,
[ɨ], like the vowel in the second syllable of Englishes roses,
[ɒ], like English u as in but,
[a], like English a as in father.
[u], like English oo as in boot,
[o], like English o as in both,
[ɔ], like English au as in caught (if you pronounce caught differently from cot; if you don't [ ] is half-way between [o] and [a].

diphthongs:

[ia], like English ia as in Tia Maria.
[ɨa], for which there is no counterpart in English.
[ua], like English ua as in truant or fluent.
[aɨ], for which there is no counterpart in English.

Lao Sentences

As in English, the basic word order of a Lao sentence is subject-verb-object. Subjects are often left out in Lao sentences. For example, in response to the question, 'Do you understand?', the Lao speaker would often respond only with the verb 'understand' [k'aw^{4}tyaɨ^1]. Like other Indochinese languages which have been analyzed, Lao does not have a verb 'be' in sentences with predicate adjectives (such as 'The food is very good.') However, it does have equivalents of 'be' (the word [pen^1]) in sentences with predicate nouns (such as 'Mr. Phong is a doctor.'):

[k'ɔ:ng^{5}kin^1	di:^{1}	lay^5]	'The food is very good.'
'food'	'good'	'very'	

[a:y^3	p'ong^5	pen^1	mɔ:^{5}]	'Mr. Phong is a doctor.'
'Mr.'	'Phong'	'be'	'doctor'	

English questions are formed by moving the verb to the beginning of the sentence (for example, 'IS Mr. Phong a doctor'). In Lao, the verb stays where it is in the subject-verb-object pattern. The same thing occurs with questions involving words like what, when, where, and so on. In Lao, these words remain at the final (direct object) position in the sentence. This makes it more difficult for the Lao speaker to ask questions in English than for the English speaker to ask questions in Lao.

Noun phrases ('the big red house on the corner'; 'the boy's dog') are formed in Lao through the use of "classifiers"--not through the use of suffixes to indicate plural or possession, nor through the use of articles similar to the English 'the' and 'a'. In the English phrases, 'a stick of gum' and 'a glass of water,' the words 'stick' and 'glass' are parallel to classifiers. In Lao every noun has a classifier, but in English only certain nouns do. Lao classifiers are used in expressing particular numbers of things, as in the following examples:

[mak^{6}kiang^{2}	hok^{6}	nuay^{2}]	'six oranges'
'orange'	'six'	clf	
[kay^{2}	nɨng^{2}	to:^{1}]	'one chicken'
'chicken'	'one'	clf	

In certain situations nouns can be used by themselves--such as to refer to something in general without reference to a particular example of that something. For example, speaking in general about horses the Lao speaker can say:

[ma:^{3}	pen^{1}	sat^{6}]
'horse'	'be'	'animal'

This sentence can be translated into English either 'Horses are animals.'; 'A horse is an animal.'; or, 'The horse is an animal.'

In Lao, modifiers follow the nouns they modify, whereas in English modifiers precede the nouns to which they refer. The Lao pattern is exemplified in the following example:

[lo:ng^{1}k'aw^{4}kɛ:ng^{1}	ni:^{3}	mi:^{1}	k'ɔ:ng^{5}kin^{1}	di:^{1}	t'ɛ:^{3}]
'restaurant'	'this'	'have'	'food'	'good'	'very'

'This restaurant has very good food.'

Verb phrases in Lao and English also differ. Lao verbs have no suffixes to indicate tense or agreement with subject. Thus, the verb [mi:^{1}] 'have,' for example, is always [mi:^{1}], whether the sentence is present, past or future, whether the subject is singular or plural, or whatever else. Instead of changing verb tenses, the element of time is established in Lao sentences through using adverb equivalents for 'today,' 'yesterday' or 'tomorrow,' and through words which parallel English modals and auxiliaries (words like must, can, will, etc.) which come before or after the verb. Negatives are expressed with the auxiliary [bɔ:^{2}], a word which is also the question particle. The word [lɛ:w^{3}], is often translated as 'already,' and indicates completed action; it is fairly close to our present perfect--or past perfect--in meaning, depending on the context.

Hmong Language

Hmong language has a structure similar in many ways to Lao. Some common features and some differences in the two languages are the following: Both Hmong and Lao words are generally one syllable; compound words and borrowed words are common in both. Hmong language has a large number of consonants--32 consonant sounds in the White Hmong dialect, and 28 in Blue Hmong compared to 20 in Lao. Unlike Lao, there are no Hmong consonants at the end of words, except an occasional [n͡g]. In the White Hmong dialect there are six simple vowel sounds, two nasal vowels and five diphthongs. The most striking difference between Hmong and Lao pronunciation is the large number of complex consonant clusters in Hmong. Hmong language has seven tones, while Lao has six.

The basic word order of Hmong and Lao is subject-verb-object. Both statements and questions are formed using this pattern. Neither languages use a form of 'be' in forming predicate adjectives, but both have an equivalent of 'be' in predicate nouns. In both languages adjectives follow the nouns they modify, and every noun has a classifier. As with Lao, Hmong words have no suffixes or prefixes to form plurals and possessives or to indicate tense or agreement of subject and verb. Tense is a dispensible element in sentences in both languages; when it is indicated, it is done so through the use of auxiliaries and modals.

ESL Methods

Laotians will have a number of problems learning English, some of which have been suggested in the above description of Lao and Hmong languages. These problems include difficulties in making certain English sounds, in combining these sounds into syllables and words, and in producing English sentences. Many students will need to be taught how to read English; for some, including both elementary and secondary students, this will be their first reading experience. (The Lao and other Buddhist cultures have centuries old literate traditions; however, some upland groups have had alphabets developed for them only in the last several decades. For information on the development of the Hmong alphabet, see the Indochinese Refugee Education Guide No. 14, "The Hmong Language: Sounds and Alphabets.")

The teacher will want to learn the specific difficulties of each of the students in order to individualize instruction. However, it is useful to know that not only do many Lao and Hmong speakers have similar problems with English, but that many other speakers of English as a second language have trouble with these same pronunciation and grammatical elements. Thus, good ESL materials which were prepared for use with other groups can be utilized successfully with Laotians. The Center for Applied Linguistics materials, only a few of which have been mentioned above, should be consulted for specific problems.

Teachers will find especially useful in teaching pronunciation, the forthcoming Center Guide No. 19, "Teaching English to Lao Speakers." This guide includes a series of twenty-seven pronunciation lessons. The problems Lao speakers have in producing and distinguishing sounds are indicated in the following list of lessons contained in the guide:

1. [p], [t] and [k] at ends of words
2. [m], [p] and [b] at ends of words
3. [n], [d] and [t] at ends of words
4. [n͡g], [g] and [k] at ends of words
5. [r] and [l]
6. [Ø], [r], [l] and [n] at ends of words
7. [r] and [iy]
8. [s] and [z]
9. [s] and [sh]
10. [sh] and [ch]
11. [s], [z], [t], [ch], and [sh] at the ends of words
12. [ɛ] and [æ]

13. [w] and [v]
14. [p], [f], [b], and [v] at ends of words
15. [y], [j] and [zh]
16. [ð], [d] and [z]
17. [θ], [t], and [s]
18.-23. Final consonant clusters with [s], [z], [t], [d], [l], and [r], respectively.
24. Other final consonant clusters
25. Initial consonant clusters with [s]
26. Initial consonant clusters with [r] and [l]
27. Initial three-consonant clusters

Some of the difficulties Laotians will have in constructing sentences include using tenses correctly and learning to include articles. They will also have problems adjusting to the various word order changes in English, including the proper ways to make noun and adjective phrases, to form negatives and to make questions. Learning the various meanings of words will demand a large amount of vocabulary building practice.

Both a large number of educational materials and professional assistance from various sources are available to teachers who seek help in developing programs for Laotians and other bilingual-bicultural students. Laotians new to this country need special attention. However, they have much to offer in return, including the opportunity for cross-cultural experiences for our students and ourselves.

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